

Reagan's secret envoy to Iran

By Douglas Frantz

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WASHINGTON—When the White House decided to try a secret diplomatic approach to the Iranians 18 months ago, the man U.S. officials reached out to for help was a conservative consultant with ties to a pro-Israeli organization.

A congressional intelligence source said the Reagan administration turned to consultant Michael Ledeen because he was not a government official and had savvy about the Middle East. He also is a close associate of Robert McFarlane, the former national security adviser who ran the secret operation.

The 45-year-old consultant made several trips to Europe last year for clandestine meetings with Manucher Ghorbanifar, an expatriate Iranian arms supplier who lives on the French Riviera and has close ties to Iranian Prime Minister Mir Hussein Moussavi.

U.S. officials have credited the trips with opening a channel of negotiation with leaders in Tehran that ultimately led to the shipment of arms to Iran and the release of three American hostages.

Ledeen, a consultant to the National Security Council and former State Department adviser, told associates that he met with Ghorbanifar several times between July and December of 1985 in Europe.

Ghorbanifar had been recommended as an intermediary by Israeli officials, including then-Prime Minister Shimon Peres and David Kimche, director-general of the Foreign Ministry, according to U.S. officials.

Ledeen had been dispatched to Israel to seek advice after administration officials decided to attempt negotiations aimed at improving relations with Iran, U.S. officials said.

"Ledeen is a very smart guy, a guy with plenty of street smarts, and extensive knowledge of the Middle East," said a congressman who has known Ledeen for several years.

Ledeen declined to comment on his role in the talks, but his wife, Barbara, confirmed in a telephone interview that he made several trips to Europe and met with an Iranian recommended by the Israelis.

"He was involved in the creation of the idea that we have to have some kind of relations with the Iranians," said Barbara Ledeen, who works for the Defense Department.

She said her husband was not involved in any of the arms shipments and he had opposed providing weapons to the Iranians.

Michael Ledeen has been on the periphery of the Reagan administration for five years. Prior to that he had been a private consultant and sometime-journalist.

In 1981, Ledeen became a special adviser to Alexander Haig, then the secretary of state, and his work brought him in contact with several Israeli leaders.

That same year, he was one of the founders of the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, a Washington group that tries to educate American officials and citizens about the importance of Israel's military defense.

The Reagan administration's secret diplomatic dance with the Iranians had its origins in the June, 1985, hijacking of TWA flight 847 to Beirut, according to U.S. officials.

Officials realized the Iranians had helped free some of the hostages from the flight and decided to attempt contact with a regime that has called the U.S. "the great Satan."

"There was an effort by the American government to explore the idea of improving relations with Iran," an official involved in the early stages of the discussions said. "You could fight with Iran. You could ignore Iran. Or you could see what was possible. We chose the last option."

Israel has maintained covert links with Iran since the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's revolutionary forces overthrew the late Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi in 1979, and Israeli officials encouraged the Americans in their effort.

Israeli intelligence also provided the U.S. with information about what was going on inside Iran, officials said.

The talks between Ledeen and Ghorbanifar began amid an atmosphere of strong mutual distrust, according to an official. The U.S. stressed the desire for broad concessions from Iran to stop terrorism.

Officials said that it was Ghorbanifar who brought up the six Americans then held hostage in Lebanon by pro-Iranian groups and the idea of arms shipments. At the time, Iran was desperate for spare parts for its American-made weapons and aircraft and hoped to win a decisive victory in its long-fought war with neighboring Iraq.

U.S. officials said there were a total of five arms shipments to Iran connected with the talks. Two shipments occurred in September, 1985, and involved weapons provided by Israel with U.S. approval. On Sept. 14, 1985, the first American hostage, Rev. Benjamin Weir, was released.

Three additional shipments were made directly by the U.S. officials during 1986. Father Lawrence Jenco was released on July 26 and David Jacobsen was freed earlier this month.

U.S. officials have said the three shipments this year would have fit inside a large cargo plane and

were made with the assistance of the CIA.

Donald Regan, the White House chief of staff, told reporters Friday that the Iranian emissaries had "demanded" arms as a show of good faith.

"These people didn't know the caliber of our people with whom they were dealing," Regan said.

Regan did not identify the Americans involved in the talks, but other officials said Ledeen played a key role. Regan did say, however, that the U.S. began using another channel at some point in the talks.

Other officials also said that Ledeen dropped out of the scene late last year, before the President signed an order directing arms shipments to Iran.

Like Ledeen, McFarlane also opposed the arms shipments, although he continued to represent the administration in its dealings with the Iranians, according to officials.